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Amy Ratto Parks

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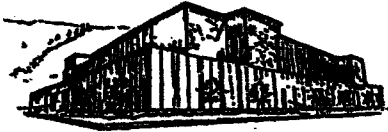
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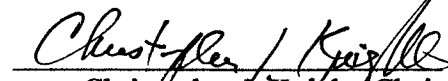
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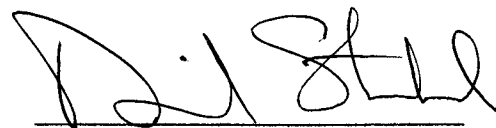
Moving Toward Perfection: Eliot's Ascetic and Apophatic Quests

by Amy Ratto Parks
B.A. Miami University, 1998
M.F.A. The University of Montana, 2004

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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Approved by:


Christopher J. Knight, Chair


Dean, Graduate School

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Date

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Moving Toward Perfection: Eliot's Ascetic and Apophatic Quests

Committee Chair: Christopher J. Knight

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It is clear from letters and notes that T.S. Eliot thought of *Four Quartets* as the pinnacle of his writing, yet while *The Waste Land* is hailed as one of the pieces most exemplifying the Modernist movement, *Four Quartets* has never enjoyed the same popularity. It is often commented that these two works offer evidence of a poet at two very different stages of life. Although they were written at different times in Eliot's career, they speak to each other as the symbolic beginning and end of Eliot's spiritual poetic search.

The Waste Land is born out of the despair and crisis of the world Eliot saw around him and the poem's progression through five sections shows evidence of a quest for something other than spiritual void. *Four Quartets* is a meditation on the presence of God that offers the resolution to *The Waste Land's* quest. Stylistically, the poems both depend on the use of silence and emptiness created through fragmentation, repetition, and heavily controlled use of voice. But it is ultimately their common interest in spiritual virtue and ascension that links them to each other and offers evidence of Eliot's personal struggle for spiritual perfection.

At the heart of both is Eliot's capacity for philosophical abstraction and difficulty. In his poetry, as well as in his personal life, Eliot was interested in the ways asceticism could refine his consciousness. Consciousness, for Eliot, meant a timeless, unified awareness of self and God, couched in the mysterious march of history. Consciousness, or his famous "still-point," was something one ascended to, and it was the only hope one might have of communion with God. His interest in asceticism as a means for ascension can be seen in the way his poetic style changes throughout his career. Because *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* were written at different stages, they offer good examples of the way his style and his consciousness progressed, leading him finally to depend heavily on the trope of apophysis.

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My warmest thanks go to Christopher J. Knight, Bob Baker and Paul Dietrich for the many hours they spent reading different versions of this paper over the past few years. Their knowledge and patience pushed this paper much further than it would have ever gone on its own.

Thanks also to Russell, who now knows more about T.S. Eliot, asceticism and apophaticism than he ever wanted to know.

“Our Meditation must proceed in due order [...]: It begins in the understanding, endeth in affection; It begins in the braine, descends to the heart; begins on hearth, ascends to heaven; Not suddenly, but by certaine stairs and degrees, till we come to the highest.”

Joseph Hall, *The Arte of Divine Meditation*, 1606

‘Yes, why doesn’t he write more?’

‘Because he wants to be everything at once, I expect. Perhaps the devil took him up into a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world – unfortunately for him!’

‘And so, I suppose, [...] that he doesn’t know which kingdom to choose?’

‘He’s still up on the mountain so far as I know...’

From a sketch about Eliot written by Vivienne, his wife (Gordon, 195)

It is clear from letters and notes that T.S. Eliot thought of *Four Quartets* as the pinnacle of his writing, yet while *The Waste Land* is hailed as one of the pieces most exemplifying the Modernist movement, *Four Quartets* is often criticized for being too philosophical and dogmatic. It is often commented that these two works offer evidence of a poet at two very different stages of life. The first has been accused of being overly complicated because of its inclusion of minute and numerous details, shifting vignettes and historical allusions. The second has been accused of being too abstruse, too open, and lacking any concrete intellectual anchor.

The apparent aesthetic difference between the two poems is, however, deceptive. Although they were written at different times in Eliot's career, they speak to each other as the symbolic beginning and end of Eliot's spiritual poetic search. *The Waste Land* is born out of the despair and crisis of the world Eliot saw around him and the poem's progression through five sections shows evidence of a quest for something other than spiritual void. *Four Quartets* is a meditation on the presence of God that offers the resolution to *The Waste Land's* quest. Stylistically, the poems both depend on the use of silence and emptiness created through fragmentation, repetition, and heavily controlled use of voice. But it is ultimately their common interest in spiritual virtue and ascension that links them to each other and offers evidence of Eliot's personal struggle for spiritual perfection.

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Defining the Terms

The terms ‘asceticism’ and ‘apophasis’ are difficult terms on which to build an argument. On their own, the words can be philosophically complex and elusive. But Eliot’s poetry depended heavily on these ideas and a complete reading of these two poems depends on understanding them. What follows is a very brief discussion of these terms as they relate to Eliot’s writing. Although this short section is not exhaustive, it is my hope that it will help to define the terms of my argument.

When asked by schoolchildren what asceticism was, Russian priest Alexander Elchaniov answered, “a system of exercises which submits the body to the spirit” (Wimbush 10). For the ascetic seeking spiritual enlightenment, the body must be overcome in order to be able to understand the world through the mind and spirit; if the body has not been transcended, one is limited by its needs and desires. A person lured by the temptations of the body acquires layers of impurity that distract her from the pursuit of God or truth. Geoffrey Halt Harpham says, “What distinguishes all forms of asceticism is the idea that the self is a composite structure containing an essence that transcends, and yet is intimately conjoined with, a substance or medium that is mutable, degraded, and rebellious” (36). In his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot expresses similar ideas about the mind of the poet when he says, “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality [...] the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature poet [...] *by being a more finely perfected medium* in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations” (my emphasis 41). When he wrote “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot wanted to become a “more finely

perfected medium” for his poems, but later in life, he also began to desire to be more finely perfected for God.

Eliot’s move away from the liberal Unitarian church toward the greater discipline of the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Anglican Church was the most public evidence of his interest in the demands of an ascetic religious life. His view of a spiritually corrupt society mirrored in *The Waste Land* also contributed to his desire to search for consciousness and fulfillment. He said, “I am one whom this sense of void tends to drive toward asceticism or sensuality” (Donoghue 272). Eliot’s growing asceticism led to an aesthetic shift in his poetry. In her biography of Eliot, Lyndall Gordon says, “His nature, like that of St. Narcissus, was drawn by martyrdoms and feats of asceticism more than by Christ’s superior morality of compassion and non-violence. [...] He had an extraordinary drive for perfection [...] he wished to be God’s ambassador” (230). She continues by saying that “nothing could be too ascetic, too violent, too ‘Ignatian’ for his needs” (224).

In Eliot’s writing asceticism meant a number of things. Primarily, it presented itself as his drive toward the refinement of words, his interest in unification of voice and his use of detail that privileged the intellect and spirit rather than the body. Language of the body is sensual and imagistic, the kind we see in earlier poems such as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In a more concrete sense, it is the literal presence of and development of people and characters in his poems. In *The Waste Land*, for example, we see a clear move away from people and society in order to move toward God.

“Apophysis” is a kind of irony that uses silence, omission and vacancy to create meaning in a piece of art. At the heart of apophatic discourse is the idea that words are ultimately inadequate for communicating any single idea to an audience, let alone ideas of Truth, the Universal, or God. Therefore, the silence in an apophatic text must be artfully used to express the inexpressible. In his story, “The Middle Years”, Henry James wrote, “The pearl is the unwritten – the pearl is the unalloyed, the *rest*, the lost” (275). It is this “pearl” that lives elusively in the silences and omissions but is essential to understanding the full meaning of a text. Apophatic discourse looks to paradox for clarity and acts on the assumption that linguistic struggle can lead to transcendence. Its drive, like Eliot’s, is toward perfection. The spiritual quest of *The Waste Land* leads toward apophysis in the heavy, resounding silence that surrounds the voice of the Thunder in the final section. Understanding *Four Quartets* depends upon understanding the silence and full emptiness Eliot creates. Rather than writing a poem that illustrated the idea of ascension, Eliot was trying to create a poem whose action was ascension; the reader is not to learn from the message of the *Four Quartets*, rather from the experience of it. His interest in the refinement and unification of language as seen in *The Waste Land* led Eliot to the apophatic language of *Four Quartets*.

Although she doesn’t use the term directly, Susan Sontag addresses the apophatic quality of silence in Modernist texts in her essay, “The Aesthetics of Silence.” She asserts that there was a characteristically Modern trend toward silence that came as a result of artists treating their art form as a means of transcendence. She says, “though no longer a confession, art is more than ever a deliverance, an exercise

in asceticism. Through it, the artist becomes purified — of himself and, eventually, of his art.” In Eliot’s case the poem is a mode of transcendence by which he too will find consciousness and communion with God. The problem, as Sontag presents it, is that the art becomes limited by its own structures. She writes,

The "spirit" seeking embodiment in art clashes with the "material" character of art itself. Art is unmasked as gratuitous, and the very concreteness of the artist's tools (and, particularly in the case of language, their historicity) appears as a trap. Practiced in a world furnished with second-hand perceptions, and specifically confounded by the treachery of words, the activity of the artist is cursed with mediacy. Art becomes the enemy of the artist, for it denies him the realization, the transcendence, he desires.

Eliot responded to this problem by using repetition, paradox and simple diction and syntax as strategies for transcending the limitations of language. The synthesis of an ascetic life and an apophatic poetic style put Eliot’s poetry in the center of the entire Modernist movement. His writing was motivated by a desire for discipline older than Christianity which led him to a place newly born into the literary world; a place where the unspoken could communicate the presence of God.

The Quest of *The Waste Land*

The Waste Land is widely understood as a poem of despair that illustrates the spiritual desert of post-WWI society. Eliot's world here is a place where lustful, desperate, gossipy people and "human engines" work monotonously in "unreal cities." Characters ask, "Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?" (38). *The Waste Land* was groundbreaking in its time for its use of multiple voices and fragmentation to (paradoxically) create a kind of silence and emptiness characteristic of the one-dimensional, spiritless life Eliot saw. By the time Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* his style had already become more ascetic. Donoghue says, "In the early poems the objects are seen from a distance and thus controlled: the distance is often a measure of the poet's distaste, the low vision, as of the 'young man carbuncular' in *The Waste Land*. The later mode is disciplinary and ascetic, and incidentally a way of gaining the highest and dearest property, the salvation of one's soul" (292). An example of this control is the narrative distance of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Not only does the repetition of image and sentence construction make it easy to picture Prufrock's surroundings, it also keeps some of the metaphysical parameters definite. "Prufrock" is the meditation of a man facing his own mortality. While Prufrock as a character may metaphorically represent the spiritual plight of a group of people at large, there is still the possibility that one would see Prufrock as a character in a set of circumstances distinct from him or herself and therefore not

realize Eliot's message of what is at stake in the poem. This may seem like an elementary argument, but in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, this type of duality is not present. For example, in *The Waste Land*, the voices in the poem gradually merge until they blend into Tiresias, a clear-visioned witness to the circumstances surrounding him. By *Four Quartets*, there is no detectable speaker. Prufrock is struggling to reconcile his own life with the world around him, but *Four Quartets* is an "ascetic text [which] erases the distinction between inner and outer by serving simultaneously as an external record of inner thoughts and as an internalized eye of social judgment" (Harpham 14). Prufrock has none of the clarity understood by the speaker of *The Waste Land*. He is an example of "The desiring self...a temporally, spatially, ontologically disoriented being" (Harpham 52).

Donoghue asserts that *The Waste Land* is a search for form unified by "variations on an absent theme" (118). In a highly fragmented text, it is the spiritual quest that forms the central idea for the fragments to revolve around. He says that the conflict is between the rational and irrational and between reason and madness. These polarities are exactly what the ascetic search is addressing. A search for clarity and faith eludes the rational mind. How can one reason that the search for consciousness is worthy without inherent faith? The ascetic search is built upon all of the paradoxes in *Four Quartets*: "at the still point, there the dance is"; "only through time time is conquered." As Eliot says in "East Coker," as we search, "the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated." *The Waste Land* is known for its depth and difficulty, but as Donoghue says, "The allusions in Eliot's poem show not the extent of his learning but the gravity of the whole enterprise" (113).

The term “quest” can be generally defined as progress motivated by a specific goal. Odysseus traveled towards home. Bunyan traveled from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. The quest of *The Waste Land*, however, ask us to reconsider the definition of a quest’s “progress.” In The Art of T.S. Eliot, Helen Gardner writes, “The progress of *The Waste Land*, for there is progress, is not the progress of narrative, movement along a line [...it is] a deeper and deeper exploration of an original scene or theme” (96). As the exploration deepens, “the poet turns away from the outer world of men to ponder over certain intimate personal experiences. [...] The intensity of apprehension in the earlier poetry is replaced by an intensity of meditation” (100).

To complicate the quest further, “*The Waste Land* is a series of visions: it has neither plot nor hero. The protagonist, or poet, is not a person. Sometimes he is a silent listener, sometimes a voice that asks questions, but gives no answers, or only cryptic ones” (Gardner, 89). Gardner calls this protagonist “the watcher” (93). Not only does the watcher listen to the variety of voices and watch people come and go, he witnesses the deepening exploration and the shift toward a meditative intensity. The watcher’s role in *The Waste Land* changes between sections. Gardner says, “At first we are least aware of someone, of a silent partner to a conversation in a Munich café, of a man with a girl on a damp evening, of a figure in a lady’s bedroom; but this shadowy person becomes a voice that laments by the waters of Lake Lemman, the fisherman, Tiresias” (89).

The watcher sometimes listens to the voices, and sometimes is one of the voices speaking, but is it through the watcher’s eyes that we witness the progress of

The Waste Land. The multiple voices of *The Waste Land* are one of its most notable qualities. These voices contribute heavily to the fragmented quality of the piece. But they also create a series of masks in the poem that results in a walled consciousness rather than one that is open to God or to a “still point”. As the watcher increasingly shifts from listening to the voices to using his own voice, the mask begins to dissolve, ultimately allowing the watcher to hear the voice of God in the final section. Tiresias is the most important manifestation of the watcher. In his own notes to the poem, Eliot wrote, “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character,’ is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. [...] What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem” (his emphasis 54-55). The following section of this paper outlines the spiritual quest of *The Waste Land* in terms of the watcher’s and Tiresias’ shift in consciousness that moves away from the spiritless society, toward an open, more ascetic vision and finally, an apophatic silence that continues in *Four Quartets*.

In the first two sections of the poem the watcher witnesses a collection of very disparate scenes and voices. In “The Burial of the Dead,” the scenes change quickly from Marie riding fearfully down the snow hill, to a young man’s loss of words in a hyacinth garden, to the prophecy of Madame Sosostris and “unreal city” where people “flowed over London Bridge.” In “A Game of Chess” the scenes slow down, allowing the watcher to see them in more depth. The second section has two scenes. The first is a lavishly decorated dressing room in which a confused, neurotic conversation between a husband and wife is taking place. The second is a bar where

two women are gossiping. Their impulsive conversation is interrupted by the bartender saying “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” at various points.

Rather than the specific people and places in the first two sections, it is important to look carefully for what the watcher *sees*. Although he does see the literal people and places he also sees their desperation and hopelessness. Eliot’s reference to Dante’s *Inferno* with the phrase “I had not thought death had undone so many” (l. 63) colors the beginning section as a place where the people are being tortured in their daily lives by the spiritless, shifting city. The conversations he observes in the second section offer another example of their nervous, directionless confusion. One of the characters asks: “What shall I do now? What shall I do? / I shall rush out as I am, and walk in the street / With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow? / What shall we ever do?” one of the characters asks. It is the urgency of the situation that is important in these scenes, and it is that urgency that the watcher will soon be able to move beyond.

In terms of the spiritual quest of *The Waste Land*, the poem begins in the heart of desolation in order to be able to ascend into consciousness. The first two sections of the poem create that Inferno-esque place to move away from. The third section offers the first major shift in the poem. In “The Fire Sermon,” the watcher identifies himself as Tiresias for the first time and describes himself as an observer, “throbbing between two lives” (l. 218). He now witnesses one scene between the typist and the clerk. But when he places himself in the scene (“And I Tiresias have foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed” [l. 243-244]) the consciousness of the poem

deepens and begins to shift toward something more universal because the audience becomes particularly aware of his unearthly omnipresence.

An ascetic quest demands that if a person is to move toward God, she must necessarily move away from people and society as a whole. A person on this kind of quest also attempts to transcend the body and society, so that she is able to gain a perspective that allows her to understand the strengths and weaknesses of her culture in the broader, historical sense. In terms of the spiritual progression of *The Waste Land*, the watcher/Tiresias begins to distance himself in a more appropriate way than he has in the past two sections. Whereas in the first section he was nearly involved in the scenes, and in the second he was so removed that he had no part in them, in this third section, he seems to be reconciling a balance between the two. This distance allows him to describe the scene between the typist and her lover with a perspective that places them in light of their society. In previous scenes, such as the gossip scene in Section II, the speaker listens to what goes on, and though it affects him, he does not judge the women involved. In the typist's scene, he has more insight into her situation. He knows that she is "hardly aware of her departed lover..." and that she thinks, "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." So although the watcher has been omniscient throughout the poem, the character of his own vision (and therefore, each scene) continues to deepen. This kind of balanced distance is ideal for the watcher. In an essay regarding the goals of asceticism, John Dillon says, "soul should dominate the body, and rational souls should dominate irrational soul" (Wimbush 82). One of the oldest Greek Monastic texts, Life of Anthony, offers a description of Anthony after he returned from living for twenty years enclosed within

a fort. It says, “He was altogether balanced, as one guided by reason and abiding in a natural state” (Wimbush 11). Although the watcher is not yet guided by reason entirely, he is beginning to achieve the kind of balanced distance evident in *Four Quartets*.

The third section also offers the purgative event that makes the revelation of the poem’s final section possible. The lines, “To Carthage then I came/ Burning burning burning” refer to St. Augustine’s travels to Carthage before realizing the temptation of the place, and leaving it. In Augustine’s own line he says, “I came to Carthage, and all around me in my ears were the sizzling and frying of unholy loves” (52). In the context of *The Waste Land* the line expresses the watcher’s horror at his realization of the place he has been surrounded by. This climax also alludes to the fires of purgation necessary in ascetic (and specifically Christian ascetic) belief for the cleanliness appropriate for entering a higher level of insight. The dislocation of body parts in the previous lines (“My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart / Under my feet”) and the allusion to Dante (“Kew / Undid me”), could be interpreted as the physical loss of the body and the emergence of a soul more ready for enlightenment and communion with God. Moreover, the title of the section itself, “The Fire Sermon,” refers to the Buddha’s Fire Sermon. The proximity of references to the Buddha and to Augustine was important to Eliot. In his notes on this section, he wrote, “the collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident” (56).

In “Death by Water,” the watcher’s voice changes again. The story of the fourth section, that of Phlebas the Phoenician, fulfills Madame Sosostris’ prophecy

and is told in a mythic voice that has not been present in the poem until this point. This section also expands in terms of the character of the watcher's omniscience because he is now able to discuss Phlebas' whole life and understand what his mistakes were all the way throughout it. This mythic kind of vision allows him to become removed enough that he is able to see how the death of this one man is related to the problems of humanity as a whole and addresses a "you" for the first time. This "you" could be interpreted both as intended for the reader, or as a "you" that includes all those who may not even ever read the line. He is not calling out to a person (Stetson) or the city itself (O City city) but to a more 'ascetically true' audience. Although it is the story of one man's life and death, "'Death by Water' is not seen to be a disaster but a stage of purification and metamorphosis (Gordon 182).

In section V, the watcher begins to emerge into a new sense of quiet observation, entering into the "intensity of meditation." The diction and syntax of the lines creates a voice that has become more distant and assured. Donoghue says, "The words surrounded by empty space receive a corresponding halo of significance, they compel the imagination not by their relation but by their loneliness" (115). It is this sense of complicated loneliness that distinguishes the watcher's voice from that of *Four Quartets*. In *Four Quartets* the speaker¹ is distant and comfortable. He does not fear the silence. But in *The Waste Land*, the watcher's consciousness is established. In his famous line, "The awful daring of a moment's surrender," he has realized the gravity and paradox of the situation: in order to be "rescued" he must surrender the

¹ As I will discuss later in the paper, I am not convinced that there is a speaker in *Four Quartets* other than Eliot himself.

final amount of control he has been struggling to keep. His surrender is in the silence of this last section.

The last section of *The Waste Land* has earned its fame through the sheer emotional power carried in its words, and in the silence between the words. Throughout the poem, Eliot's fragmented style creates silence, but the quality of the silence changes as the quest progresses. When we compare the silence in the final section to the silence at the end of the second section, we can hear that change. At the end of section two, we hear the repetition of the phrase "good night" in these lines:

Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.

Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night (170-173).

These heavily punctuated lines create a silence that is empty, negative, and spiritless. Between the spoken words there is only the lonely silence of people walking out separately into the night, receding back into their own quietly desperate lives. In the third line, it almost feels as though the words are repeated just to have something that fills the silence, and the section ends with a feeling of singularity and entrapment.

Beginning at line 400 in the final section of the poem the voice of the Thunder enters "the jungle crouched, humped in silence" with the single word, "DA". What follows are three commands to give, sympathize, and control the self. The following thirty-four lines are arguably some of the most fragmented lines of the entire poem, but the result of this fragmentation is a deep, resounding silence that is most often

considered to be the voice of God. As the silence builds and become more resounding, the speaker allows himself to be humbled by the power of God's voice. Donoghue says, "The frontier of consciousness is not the place where words fail, but where self dies, in faith, making the awful surrender" (128). By surrendering his control and sense of self, he begins to be conscious and "in Eliot, consciousness is the most available form of virtue: to be conscious is to be as near as possible to being holy" (Donoghue 115).

By this point in the poem, the watcher has settled into his own voice because his earthly, desiring self has been surrendered. This new, grounded voice shows the watcher reconciling himself to the fact that he cannot control the death or destruction that is around him, ending the world, in fact. He is still searching, but says, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (426) His voice appears one final time, in one of the most famous lines of *The Waste Land*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruin" (431). In this final expression, the watcher is unified in a way that he was not throughout the rest of the poem because he is acting as a witness; he has finally removed himself from the 'scene' and is able to see it with clear vision for the first time.

The Waste Land ends with a sense of emotional opposition befitting the ascetic climax it has reached. Primarily, there is a sense of hopelessness rooted in the Dante quotation in line 427. The translation includes the phrase, "be mindful...of my pain" (Southam 196). This translation could lead one to believe that the speaker leaves the poem miserable and only more aware of the reasons for his misery. However, the quote is taken from Purgatory, a place of suffering, but also of hope.

All of the souls in Purgatory are willing to endure their suffering because they know that they will be rewarded with an entrance into Heaven. In his essay on Dante, Eliot says, "The souls in purgatory suffer because they wish to suffer...in their suffering is their hope" (220). Once again, he is referring to an ascetic cleansing and a belief that his suffering could help gain virtue. By ending in a purgatorial suffering, the speaker can hope that he will be saved from the hellish place he has traveled through.

The clear vision of the end of the this poem is, of course, complicated. It is with this clearer vision that the speaker can "know this place for the first time" ("Little Gidding," 242), but he is unable to do more than realize the purgatorial quality of it. He is still unable to feel the entire beautiful and deep consciousness of *Four Quartets*. His new vision does allow him to understand the *potential* for peace and communion, however. This is why he is able to hear the voice of God in the thunder and it is this understanding that changes the quality of the silence surrounding the words "DA. / Datta [...] DA / Dayadhvam [...] DA / Damyata" to one that holds the weight of holy presence. Gordon says,

This silence circles repeated hints of what
is *not* waste. We hear it in the space that
follows the 'DA' of thunder; and in the space
which in the early printings of the poems
preceded the sublime peace of 'Shantih,
shantih, shanti'. [...] (this) suggests that this
is a poem not solely about collapse, but also

about a possibility of regeneration (190).

The silence created in this section shows evidence of the shift into apophysis because as much of the meaning (if not more) is communicated through the silence between the words rather than from the words themselves. Although Eliot gave the Thunder holy words to speak, he would not have been presumptuous enough to actually give God a voice that speaks earthly words. To do so would have undermined the spiritual encounter of the scene because a true communion would be impossible to communicate. Nevertheless, it is the emotional weight of these silences that makes *The Waste Land* succeed as a poem that offers more than a hopeless picture of devastation and leaves room for the communion and consciousness found in *Four Quartets*.

The Apophatic Challenge of *Four Quartets*

Although the *Four Quartets* were written many years after *The Waste Land*, they seek to enact the state of consciousness achieved in *The Waste Land*. The ascetic progression in *The Waste Land* itself can be seen in the spiritual quest of the poem. By the end of *The Waste Land*, the poem has enacted a ceremonial purgation at the end of “Fire Sermon,” has reached an ascetic pinnacle and is able to hear the message of God speaking to him in the voice of the thunder. *Four Quartets* should be read as though it follows *The Waste Land*. In this sense, *The Waste Land* becomes an act of

purgation for the speaker, through which his vision becomes refined and purified enough to comprehend the world through a unified vision seen in *Four Quartets*.

The progression from *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets* shows evidence of the classical spiritual quest in which the seeker severs all social ties, becomes a recluse in some distant literal or figurative desert and then eventually emerges from solitude enlightened. Gordon says, "In the lives Eliot invokes – Dante, Christ, Augustine, the Grail knight, Ezekiel – there is always a dark period of trial, whether in a desert, a slough of despond, or hell, followed by initiation, conversion, or the divine light itself" (178). In terms of aesthetics, this movement is seen in the progressive unification of voice and consciousness between the two poems. Unlike the voices in *The Waste Land* that are nervous, desperate or passionate, the voice of *Four Quartets* is deliberate and assured. There is no panic or syntactical fragmentary rush. Donoghue says, "The fundamental motive of *Burnt Norton* is to void the claim of spontaneity; to represent as vulgar any immediate response to an event; to imply a form of life in which the meaning of an event comes long after its occurrence" (264).

Four Quartets is driven by a search for the place where memory, choice and present situation braid into one point in space-time. It is driven by a search for a unification of all possibilities: all choices made and unmade, all things done and left undone. The poem asks us to consider the unchosen path and its role in present life. In this way it makes the unchosen chosen and unifies the idea of time by bringing the past into the present. The crises of memory and choice in *The Waste Land* hinge on the concept of time as a linear progression. The fragmentation of *The Waste Land* creates a dislocation in time and space that embraces a linear progression. The people

there are living the consequences of past choices but are unaware of the way the past has imprinted the present. In essence, they live in a world of linear time and because of their indifference are slaves to the consequence of choice. But *Four Quartets* seeks to eliminate the distinction between past, present and future by expressing an ever-aware quality of time. Time plays an important but different role in each of the poems. To make this clearer, consider a box drawn on paper. Consider the box to be representative of time in a human life. For *The Waste Land*, we might draw arrows that all begin at the same point in the center of the box, but spray out in every possible angle, and extend beyond the box toward unknown ends, representing the manner in which *The Waste Land* makes an effort to extend beyond the span of a single life to capture a larger historical context. But it would be impossible to draw lines in this box to represent the element of time in *Four Quartets*. In order to do so accurately, we would need to be able to draw arrows that have their starting points covering every possible inch of the box, but that extend *into* the page and leave the box completely, as though, if we turned the page over, we would be able to see them radiating through the back of the paper and moving independently of the paper, or the pencil.

The distinction between the different views of time can be considered a distinction between earthly time versus eternal time, which is an idea that Eliot may have found in St. Augustine. In his *Confessions*, Augustine defines time “a kind of extension” (278). Martin Warner expands on that idea by adding an additional translation to Rex Warner’s. He says that “distention” (Augustine’s word) can mean extension or distraction, therefore meaning that time is not only about memory,

expectation or consciousness, but also about the discordance between them.

Augustine says, "If the present were always present and did not go into the past, it would not be time at all, but eternity" (*Confessions*, 268). In *Four Quartets*, Eliot is trying not only to express this idea, but he is also trying to express the feeling of being in such a state of consciousness. Warner says, "The *Confessions* are themselves intended as a spiritual exercise, in part intended to help the peregrine soul in its pilgrimage towards perfection. Analogously, the later *Quartets* seek to explore a sensibility for which perfection is a focus of aspiration" (229). In particular, we see this in Eliot's lines, "Not in the intense moment / Isolated, with no before or after / But in a lifetime burning in every moment" ("East Coker" V, 192-194).

It was Eliot's hope that the unification of these things both in and out of time would recreate a level of consciousness in which a communion with God would be possible. But this left Eliot in an apophatic predicament. There is no way to completely communicate the presence of God because God is the ultimate mystery. In order to express a communion with God, he would have to write a poem that was ultimately about the mystery of God. The transition into a poem based in mystery is evidence of a broader shift from *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*. Between the two poems Eliot changes focus from the world of human desire to the world of mystery and spirit. *The Waste Land* is peopled by those who have been "undone" by their indifference and neurosis. We see the base dramas of miscommunication and false love performed against a back drop of brown fog and urban confusion. The young man carbuncular arrives, leaves with a "patronizing kiss," the typist goes back to her solitude "glad it's over." But in the years between *The Waste Land* and *Four*

Quartets, Eliot made the choice to write a poem that could transcend the low vision of the city and the body, in order to train the vision toward God. In *Four Quartets* the only “characters” who could be compared to *The Waste Land* are the children and the bird in the rose garden. But even the children are out of sight. They can be heard, but not found. Instead, we hear of “the weakness of the changing body” and that “flesh cannot endure” heaven and damnation. We learn that both “men and bits of paper [are] whirled by the cold wind.” The mentions of the body revolve around cleansing and purification by “emptying the sensual with deprivation,” “cleansing affection from the temporal.” It instructs us to “descend lower, descend only / Into the world of perpetual solitude.”

It is the nature of apophatic discourse to study a dual world where silence speaks, secrets unintentionally divulge themselves, and language obscures the communication of experience and emotion. The study of apophatic texts ultimately asks, how can one represent the immortal or the infinite in an artistic form? Eliot seems to be asking the same question. The heart of this problem lies in the apophatic problem of presence. Often apophatic texts rely on the present absence of a character, or the echoed communication of something left unsaid. In *Four Quartets*, God is essentially the absent “character”. One can feel God’s presence but one cannot see the face of God directly. Therefore one can only communicate the feeling of presence.

To complicate this further, God cannot be known through human structures such as language.² In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, “God does not reveal himself in the world” (88). Even though Eliot could feel God’s

² We may learn God’s teachings offered through other humans in sources such as the Bible. But God, as an entity, does not speak in the words of human language.

presence, he could not place God directly in the world. His own consciousness had brought him to a place where he understood more than he could express. Even if human understanding can be universal, human expression is finite because it is based in language that is layered with historical and social meaning. He writes, “Words strain, / crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay” (149-153). So Eliot had to trust the silence in a poem to express the weight, stillness and paradox of consciousness. In order for the book to be an inclusive expression there had be something left to mystery. Eliot’s answer to the challenge of apophysis was to craft poems that used repetition, paradox, and simple diction as strategies for clarity.

It is clear that while writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot saw the world around him as nothing but a fragmented anarchist’s mess. However, as Eliot became more religious, he began to feel a connection to a center, not only in himself, but also in something that existed beyond him. In her essay, “From *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*: Evolution of a Method,” Jewel Spears Brooker says that “In accepting the Christian position he willed to believe that there really is a Center, a shared Center, whether it is named or unnamed... His focus changes from reconstructing a shared reference point to glimpsing a universal pattern” (89). *The Waste Land* was based in spiritual quest and used fragmentation that would illustrate the horror of a spiritually void society, but *Four Quartets* used repetition to illustrate the eternal connection between all times and all events, while also creating unity from the ideas of opposition, contradiction and paradox in the universe.

Repetition works in this poem by creating a cyclical feeling that highlights all of these qualities. This cyclical pattern mirrors the movement of the St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, and is more generally associated with the intonations of a traditional sermon. Although the poem moves through various small scenes (gardens, theater, sea coasts), it remains anchored by the repetition of words and ideas such as "rose," "fire," "dark," "dance," "still point," "past and future," etc. Besides just repeating several individual words throughout the text, Eliot also uses words or phrases in quick repetition in a small number of lines. Already in the first section of *Burnt Norton* the tone builds through repetition:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past (....) (1-3)
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present. (9-10)

Not only do these lines encapsulate Eliot's primary expression of time and consciousness, they also establish the quiet, distant voice that permeates the entire poem. About these lines, Donoghue says, "These sentences (about time) are propelled not by a speaker in charge of them but by solemn, impersonal agitations maintained as if without human intervention" (254). Later he adds, "The whole movement is at once impersonal, as if the words were uttering themselves in a ritual to make sense of man's presence in the natural world, and irresistibly personal in the turns and trillings

of the phrases” (265). The speaker’s confidence is highlighted by his ability to let himself disappear, and to allow emptiness and silence into the poem; by his ability to resist the desire to fall into chatter (Donoghue 267). The voice in *Four Quartets* is entirely unmasked, to the point where it almost feels as though Eliot is writing in his own voice rather than that of a speaker.

This section of lines includes a number of the abstract, opaque words and phrases for which Eliot was criticized. The choice of a word such as “time” complicates the poem because it is hard to know exactly which meanings are included and excluded. Even if Eliot intended to include all possible connotations and contexts, the reader is unable to locate a specific intention in the lines. On a first read the lines sound more like a riddle than a poem. Plenty of assertions can be made, but it is hard to know what Eliot himself intended. It is safe to say, though, that his choice of words was one way he tried to confront the problem of apophysis. In order for the poem to create an immediate experience, he had to force the readers back into themselves through the screen of the words. Because the poem is cryptic and challenging, it refuses to give the reader an experience and demands that the reader come to find it.³

By using repetition, Eliot tried to reinforce what he knew was true: the need to move into darkness, the need for an awareness of time, the still point. Each of those ideas are developed in the poem through their continual use and changing context. It is as though he hoped that readers would gradually collect the meanings he intended if they continued to read the phrases. His use of paradox was a strategy for clarity that came from the other direction. Phrases like, “Only through time time is conquered,”

³ While this kind of complexity is also characteristic of *The Waste Land* (and also of Modernist poetry in general) *Four Quartets* is different because it gives the reader no resource for understanding except herself, whereas other Modernist texts might also rely on historical, religious or social allusions.

“There would be no dance, and there is only the dance,” “In my beginning is my end” appear throughout the text, and reinforce the riddling quality of the opening lines. But they are not intended merely as puzzles. They were included because of their inherent truth that can be understood with discerning concentration. Only by becoming aware of time can we cease to be consumed by time’s passing. There is no literal dance, but the movement at the still point creates a sensation of energy and awareness that moves like a dance. In our beginning we find the simplicity and innocence that allows us to understand the mystery of death.

Paradox is also used as a way of coming to clarity by eliminating possibilities. Even though Eliot cannot say what consciousness or God, is he can say what they are not. He says, “Neither flesh nor fleshless...Neither arrest nor movement...Neither ascent nor decline.” (*Burnt Norton* II) We learn that in the still point, the soul experiences “The inner freedom from practical desire, / Release from action and suffering, release from the inner / And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded / By a grace of sense” (*Burnt Norton* II). His use of paradox here works with both the ascetic and apophatic challenges of the poem. It highlights his ascetic focus because the still point is a state of ascetic distance and perspective. It is a pause between opposing forces, achieved through the rejection of the body that is “filled with fancies” (*Burnt Norton* III), resulting in an awareness of time that is also characterized by opposition. It works with apophysis by coming indirectly to the sensation of consciousness.

Repetition and paradox both work in the poem by coming to clarity indirectly. But one of Eliot’s primary concerns in *Four Quartets* was to write a poem that could be felt as “immediately as the odour of a rose” (Eliot, 64). He did not want to write a

prayer, an address to God or a passionate invocation. He wanted to create an experience that spoke beyond his own words. He said, "Great poetry may be made without the direct use of emotion whatever: composed out of feeling solely" (Kermode 41). His distinction between emotion and feeling here highlights his interest in the immediate. The difference between them is important. A feeling is a direct emotional response, while "emotion" is the label for that feeling. Being able to label a feeling as a specific emotion requires a cognitive distance. For example, we often feel sad before saying to ourselves, "I am sad." Eliot wanted *Four Quartets* to be a poem that communicated immediate experience to the reader. His simple diction, syntax, and lack of allusions were choices he made in an effort to make the poem immediate.

These moves toward simplicity balance the complexity of the repetition and the paradox (but it should be noted that even those techniques use a simple, straightforward diction). The sections of simple, prosy lines are beautiful and evocative as they offer instruction to the reader. In *East Coker* he says, "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God." In *The Dry Salvages* he says, "These are only hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses; the rest / Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action." In *Little Gidding* he writes, "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know that place for the first time." These lines offer simple wisdom that

balances the effort and challenge of other places in the poem and allow the reader to feel a sense of intellectual immediacy.

The simplicity of these phrases and the overall simple diction link Eliot to the Metaphysical poets and the genre of religious poetry. Compared to the language and allusions of *The Waste Land*, the deceptive “simplicity” of *Four Quartets* is obvious. In a discussion of the characteristics of Donne’s poetry, Louis Martz says his poems have (quoting Donne):

a conversational tone and accent, expressed in a language that is, ‘as a rule simple and pure’; ‘highly unconventional imagery, including the whole range of human experience, from theology to the commonest detail of bed and board’; an ‘intellectual argumentative evolution’ within each poem, a strain of ‘passionate paradoxical reasoning which knits the first line to the last’ and which often results in an elaboration of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it’; above all, including all, that “unification of sensibility” which could achieve “a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of a thought into a feeling’ (2).

All of these statements could describe the *Four Quartets*; Eliot himself wrote, “It is the literature we read with the least effort that can have the easiest and most insidious influence upon us” (Kermode 103).

Even though the similarities between Eliot and the Metaphysicals are easy to see, his praise in *Four Quartets* is neither passionate, joyous nor desperate. In fact, it might be difficult to call *Four Quartets* a poem of praise at all because praise inherently represents a separation between the object of praise and the gracious person. The immediacy of *Four Quartets* unifies the subject and object by allowing the speaker a level of consciousness in which he is aware enough to be in the presence of God. Unification of action and voice create the sense of immediacy Eliot aimed for in the poem. In a discussion of the philosophy of *Four Quartets*, A.D. Moody says, “The poet...confronts his readers not simply with a meaning such as would challenge their ideas and opinions, but with a mode of being, the challenge of which is existential” (Warner, 224).

Why “The Poetry Does Not Matter”

Although he lived for some time after the completion of the poem and continued to work as a dramatist, he did not reveal any further poetic projects. Even in the middle of *Four Quartets* he wrote, “That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / with words and meanings. The poetry does not matter” (*East Coker*, 68-71). Perhaps he himself evolved into yet another kind of vision, one even he could not find words to express. Also, he may have realized that in order to

create a perfect representation of consciousness or God he would somehow have had to include every possibility; the poem would have to communicate the exuberance, the anxiety and the relief of the mystery. As he searched for tangible evidence of his understanding of God, he found himself most comfortable with apophasis where silence expresses more than the written or spoken word.

The problem with texts that confront apophatic problems is that they seem to take on an impossible challenge. It is in the nature of apophasis that Eliot is unable to represent his understanding of God. *Four Quartets* is a book that seeks to make things that are invisible (consciousness, God) visible through imagery and language. In The Gift of Death, Derrida discusses the “visible in-visible” and the “absolute invisible.” The visible in-visible characterizes things of the visible world that are, because of circumstance, unseen. He explains this quality of visible in-visibility by referring to bodily organs; they are hidden by our skin but can be revealed through surgery or accident. Quite differently, the “absolute invisible” refers to things that “fall out of the register of sight, namely, the sonorous, the musical, the vocal or the phonic” (90). Eliot was on a quest for the absolute invisible. No matter the length or efficiency of his search, he would never be able to “uncover” his answer in visible form. Essentially, if he were able to represent this mystery artistically, the mystery would not exist in the same state any longer. This is because the mystery involves his perception of the unity of time, space, spirit, and the physical, present world. He would never be able to accurately communicate the unity he perceives because such a representation would make the perception present and the power of the perception lies in its unattainability - in essence, its absence. Wittgenstein writes, “The sense of the

world must lie outside the world” (86). In order for the expression to be “true,” it still must lie outside its own expression. It can be concluded, then, that if Eliot could write about it, it wouldn’t qualify as the unwritten story and there would still have to be an element of mystery that had been left uncaptured. The commitment to even a word, note, color or line limits the representation of one’s experience because it automatically excludes some of the possibilities. If artistic structure is inherently limiting, then the communication of the universal depends heavily upon the “pearl” (James, 275) of the unwritten story. But the unwritten story cannot be clearly understood by a reader. By this measure, the creation of a truly universal text is impossible.

To end a study of Eliot by reading *Four Quartets* is to see the author at his own pinnacle of expression. *Four Quartets* was the last poem Eliot wrote, and was his favorite by many accounts, no doubt, for its expression of a worldview it had taken him a lifetime to develop. In an essay called, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative,” Kallistos Ware says, “refinement, not destruction: that is the aim [...] it seeks not to undermine but to transform the body, rendering it a willing instrument of the spirit.” As his poetry progressed from *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*, Eliot refined the language and transformed the body of the poem into an instrument of the spirit; he aimed for nothing less than to communicate the presence of God. Although he himself knew that the text did not succeed as he had hoped, his growth occurred simply as a result of his search and pursuit. And his communion with the mystery itself sustained him.

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